

ANOTHER THING

Is Your Suffering Really Necessary?

In Lent we are given a lot of messages about crucifixion and suffering, many of which perhaps leave us cold. Why is the theme of the Cross central? Could not Christianity be a bit more cheerful about our human condition? Here are two reflections on the discussion:

1 *No punches should be pulled:* Suffering is by nature a ghastly, ugly thing that deforms and destroys humanity. We should understand that any justification of suffering in the abstract will have to be very convincing indeed to cope with this fact. Pious platitudes need not apply.

2 *We should adopt an appropriate bedside manner* We are dealing with the most delicate area and should allow nothing into our attempts at justification that ignores or undervalues human pain. Whatever else, this discussion treads on holy ground!

Jesus Suffered Was this because it was *divinely necessary*? Or only because human beings inflicted it on him? We habitually regard *our* sufferings as accidental, losing our temper in the process with an “unlucky” world. We say that *his* suffering has specific importance, a quite unique meaning within his life-story. Is this related to the “voluntary” understanding of his presence in our midst - because it tells us something vital about the *degree* of his commitment to humanity? Does he suffer because all human beings *do* suffer (leaving aside the reason why)? Or is *suffering humanity* simply the reason for his coming, the nexus of our need for redemption? See overleaf for more Christian questions.

Does God Demand Suffering? In his work on atonement St Anselm thought of sin as an *infinite* offence (because it affronts the *infinite* dignity of God). Therefore, the reparation for sin must be infinite in order to make good the damage between God and humanity. The only infinite reparation is in the death of Christ, in which a divine, immaculate sacrifice is offered to the Father. (The snag is that God can appear in this analysis as an angry and heartless being, easily surpassed in moral dignity by a good human.)

Does Being Human Demand Suffering? If we can, however temporarily, set aside the question (*why suffering?*) and look at the facts that suffering entails, we can see pragmatic results of suffering that appear necessary to *humanity as we understand it*. Qualities like tenderness, sympathy, pity, and kindness could hardly exist without the pain which *elicits*, and to some extent *teaches* them: just as forgiveness, a very high human quality, can only come in the wake of offence or sin. Love itself can hardly be imagined without pain. If moral nobility is impossible outside a context where its opposite is a real alternative, perhaps real love is impossible without the presence of suffering. *Intellectually*, of course, this won't wash, because goodness does not *demand* evil in order to be good; but in our experience we find that the depth of love frequently reflects the lover's degree of understanding of/sensitivity to suffering. In our own life we certainly find that suffering reveals depths and capacities we had not dreamed we possessed; perhaps in the heart of the fire we would rather not uncover these depths, and would settle for shallows if only the pain would stop. But then we would be turning our backs on something real about ourselves, escaping part of our being that seems only to be found through suffering.

Is Our Suffering Necessary For Salvation? Some people think that humanity's coming to divine life demands a transformation through suffering. They speak of suffering as *birthpangs* or *training*, and assure us that entry into eternal bliss more than compensates for the grief that it

costs to arrive there. If people see themselves as imperfect, vulnerable, half-baked, or just as a puzzle, this can be consoling. (Hebrews 5:7-10 seems to depict Jesus in these terms - his suffering was necessary to perfect him.) We *are* half-baked, and suffering is, so to speak, the oven hotting up. It does God no dishonour to say that he creates us *incomplete* - on condition that he accords us enough time, and sufficient means, to become complete. If in personal terms, we experience suffering as a threat to our identity, as robbing us of the person we are; that is because the *real* me has yet to be born, and this process demands a death followed by a resurrection. Qualities like *surrender* and *resignation* can appear appropriate: yet we also struggle to find our way to rebirth, to fulfil our *longing* for life that is deeper or fuller than the present. Is this, as some pragmatists would suggest, a mere tragic fantasy, preventing our proper involvement in the real world? And could not God have created a world where our growth in knowledge and capacity for joy does not entail suffering?

Christianity has some mysterious traditions about the suffering of Jesus.

1 *The Brazen Serpent* In the desert "God sends fiery serpents" to bite his people; many die. Moses intercedes, and is told to raise a brazen serpent standard; all who look on it will live. "Sympathetic magic"; but Jesus takes up the theme in John 3:13-21 in his first prediction of the Cross. His crucified body is, then, a sort of ikon of our human condition, our sick and condemned faithlessness. All who look on this ikon of desertion will be healed of their ills ("saved").

2 *The Suffering Servant* Isaiah has a series of four poems, which describe a servant of God whose biography can be read as a life God has cursed. He is required to receive, entirely without deserving it, the punishment of a sinful people. They stand appalled while he loses his dignity and humanity, and all assume that God has turned away from him, that he is condemned. But secretly, the punishment he bears "gratuitously" - without deserving it - puts him in relationship with all who look upon him: he is secretly "saving" them by his sufferings (Is 52:13 - 53:12).

I find this second idea very deep. Could it be that God unveils to us, in suffering, the image of a loss we are in danger of incurring? In the crucified Christ God himself presents us with an ikon of damnation. In it we can contemplate the results of sin visited upon human flesh. But much more importantly, we are involved in this infliction, which is carried out *in the name of true religion*. Jesus died this way because the civil and religious authorities could not live with his divine claims. If he was simply a deluded and dangerous rabble-rouser, of course his burial would have been the end of him. But if he is - as he claims - the fulness of God's self-gift to the world, then his crucifixion is an ikon of God's self-giving *and* of our inability to receive, to believe, to trust God. The risen Christ, *still pierced by nails and lance*, calls us to re-evaluate the encounter between God and us, and thus places in the ikon of suffering and death - the Cross - the ultimate judgment on all experience, *including suffering itself*. This, it says, is what divine life - real life - becomes when a human being lives it in the human world. This is what God will accept in order to tell humanity of his love. If the Cross stands as God's ultimate message to us, may it not also be our most complete message to God as a race in need of salvation?

Is there a key here that can help us to "understand" this mystery?